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ABSTRACT

Traditional approaches to family stress theory have underscored the importance of the family as a reactor to stress, as a manager of resources within the family system. In contrast, the active process of employing coping strategies within the family and in transactions with the community have received limited consideration in both research and theory building. This paper examines three studies of family coping strategies employed in adapting to family separations. Through analysis of coping strategies which vary according to the severity of the stressors (family separations) an attempt is made to clarify the role of coping behavior in family stress theory. Three concepts of Community Norms, Interpersonal Supports, and Collective Supports are introduced into the family stress framework, along with new propositions. Family coping behavior, which is an active, rather than reactive process, is viewed as a vital if not critical aspect of family stress theory. (Author)

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INTEGRATING COPING BEHAVIOR IN FAMILY STRESS THEORY*

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Traditional approaches to family stress theory have emerged from family sociology with a resulting emphasis on family vulnerability and regenerative power, the twin concepts which characterize the family's ability to withstand the initial impact of a stressor, and, if internally disrupted by the stress, the family's ability to recover. Burr (1973) has synthesized the research and theories that have gained coherent form in nearly half a century of family research and has formulated specific propositions around these two concepts. The picture of family adaptation to stress that emerges from this literature depicts the family as a reactor to stress, as a manager of resources within the family unit to combat and control change within the family system. In contrast, the active process of employing coping strategies within the family and in transactions with the community to decrease its vulnerability to stress, have received limited consideration in both research and theory building. The purpose of this paper is to examine select studies of family coping strategies and attempt to determine the place of coping behavior in the framework of family stress theory. This effort appears to complement recent advances in family stress theory which focus on defining family process variables (Hansen & Johnson, in press) and advancing the study of family problem solving behavior (Hill, in press).

It seems reasonable to argue that successful family adaptation to stress involves at least two major sets of family resources. First, the family must have or will develop its internal resources such as integration and adaptability to withstand the social and psychological stresses to which the family may be exposed. These resources have been carefully documented in the host of disaster studies reviewed by Hill and Hansen (1962) and in the classic studies of family adjustment in the face of the depression and unemployment (Angell, 1936; Cavan & Ranck, 1938; Koos, 1946), and appear to be well delineated in the theory building efforts to date (Burr, 1973). Second, the family will have or develop, and employ a range of coping strategies directed at strengthening its internal organization and functioning, at procuring community and social supports, and in some cases, at diverting, reducing or eliminating the source of

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stress.

To carry the argument further, one may hypothesize that families manage its internal affairs in order to maximize the flow of energy into the employment of coping strategies which may be more effective in diverting, reducing or possibly removing the source of stress. An analagous situation can serve to clarify the issue being discussed. In facing the spring floods, do residents of a threatened community depend upon a previously established and integrated system of walls and banks, which have withstood prior rains and floods? Or do the residents manage this stressful event by a planful effort to strengthen its existing defenses, and by pursuing other coping strategies of diverting the flood, removing families from the community, or possibly deploying heavy earthmoving equipment to areas which are most vulnerable? A dependence on family attributes which may be vital and successful in reducing discomfort and enhancing family stability, may well be catastrophic for family adaptation if they retard the enactment of coping strategies directed towards the stressor event and other family needs which may emerge as a consequence of stress. What data are available to support such a line of reasoning? To pose the question in the context of family stress theory, we need to ask if family coping behavior is a definable, measureable and unique dimension of family resources in the management of stress?

COPING DATA TO BE EXAMINED IN THE CONTEXT OF FAMILY STRESS THEORY

Guided by Hill's (1949) study of families of servicemen separated by the demands of World War II and reunited following the war, investigators of the Naval Health Research Center initiated two prospective studies of family separation and one collaborative study with a midwest University* on family adjustment to repeated but short-term separations which were part of life in a large international, non-military organization. Briefly, the first study, a longitudinal investigation of families of missing in action and unaccounted for in the Vietnam conflict (McCubbin et al., 1975) focuses on the long term effects of prolonged separation (average 6 years) upon family stability and child development. The second prospective study of military families examined family adjustment to a routine but lengthy (8 months) separation (McCubbin & Lester, 1977; McCubbin, Dahl, Lester & Hammond, 1976). The third was a study designed to record and codify family coping behavior in response to repeated but short term (averaged under 1 week per) separations (Boss, McCubbin & Lester, 1977). All three investigations included in their design, the systematic study of family coping behavior in response to the stress of separation.

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Coping, broadly defined as strategies for managing stress, has been a topic of considerable interest to behavioral scientists attempting to predict the behaviors a family unit will adopt when confronted with a threat, and to determine the full range of coping patterns families employ in managing the hardships of the separation. Studies specifically related to coping with separation can be traced back to Hill's (1949) family separation study, in which he identified a roller-coaster type pattern of adjustment which involved initial disorganization, followed by recovery and reorganization. Although he touched on aspects of coping behavior when he identified families who coped by "closing ranks" and who appeared to do better, his total findings on family adequacy gave only a hint as to the full range of coping strategies families, experiencing separation may exhibit in managing the stressful situation. The majority of studies which touch on the subject have tended to emphasize the dysfunctional responses to separation: spouses' manifestation of depression, anxiety, acting-out behavior, and psychosomatic complaints (see McCubbin, Dahl & Hunter, 1976 for a review of the literature). While important, these studies have been generally theoretical and descriptive in the assessment of coping responses and do not possess the kind of objectivity which permit their application to prospective studies requiring more comprehensive and parsimonious measures of family responses to separation.

The three recent investigations focused on coping behavior as an important dimension of family adaptation to stress. The Coping with Separation Inventory (McCubbin & Dahl, 1975) and its non-military version, the Spouses' Coping Inventory (McCubbin, Dahl, Boss & Lester, 1976) used in these investigations were developed to provide information about how spouses perceived their overall response to the stressor of separation and what they viewed as helpful to them in overcoming the hardships encountered during the separation. Since coping behaviors may be viewed as something more than the mere absence of maladaptive or pathological behaviors, it appeared likely that an inventory measuring wives' coping responses to separation as well as emphasizing desirable behavior might be constructed. The instruments were guided by a design which would arrive at scales of both desirable and undesirable behaviors that might be factorially homogeneous. Instrument construction was further guided by the hierarchical approach to the organization of behavior that has been discussed in the literature on the classification and assessment of children's behavior (Borgatta & Fanshel, 1965; Borgatta & Cautley, 1966; Ross et al., 1965). As the approach had been used in these studies two levels of abstraction and generality were identified behavior items and factors. The operational meaning of coping was established by a list of behavior items depicting how

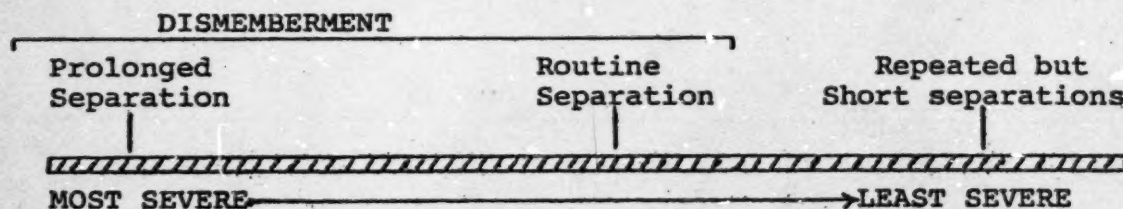
wives responded to the total period of separation which averaged six years for those in the longitudinal study, 4-6 months for those in the case of a routine, but lengthy separation, and an average of less than a week for multiple separations in the case of corporate families. The underlying dimensions of coping identified as factors were isolated through factor analysis involving a principal components solution with an orthogonal varimax rotation (Kaiser, 1958).

The methodology and full report of findings have been presented elsewhere (McCubbin, et al., 1976; McCubbin & Lester, 1977 and Boss McCubbin & Lester, 1977). However the coping behaviors identified and described in these separate investigations are presented in this paper as being central to present efforts to advance family stress theory.

FINDINGS

In adopting Burr's (1973) definition of a stressor event as one that produces a change in the family social system (boundaries, structure, goals and processes, roles or values) and in applying Hansen & Hill's (1964) system of classifying family crises we can conceptualize each of the studies along a continuum reflecting the severity of the separation experience, (Figure 1).

FIGURE 1



Prolonged separations is the most severe. Evidence of this would be dismemberment, the unpredictability surrounding father's return to the family unit, and the requirement that the family develop a mode of operation which prepares it for both father's death and his return. Routine separation is also dismemberment, but without the immediate traumas of war and without evidence indicating doubt about father's return. The family is called upon adapt to lengthy absence and develop a system of operation which involves some changes in roles, processes, and boundaries in order to manage the separation. In contrast, repeated separations is not a situation of physical dismemberment, but represents a stressful series of events which call for family adaptation to the movement of a spouse in and out of the system. Major changes in roles, structure, and processes are not necessarily called for, although they may occur in select families.

By first classifying these studies in terms of the severity of the stressor events, we are then able to examine

the coping patterns which were identified in these investigations along the same continuum and in doing so draw some inferences about behavior as function of the severity of the stress, (Table 1).

TABLE I: COPING STRATEGIES IN THE MANAGEMENT OF FAMILY STRESS - FAMILY SEPARATION

PROLONGED SEPARATION (Average 6 yrs) (McCubbin, Dahl, Lester Benson & Robertson 1976) (N=47)	ROUTINE SEPARATION (8 months) McCubbin & Lester 1977) (N = 82)	REPEATED SEPARATIONS (average 1 week) (Boss : McCubbin, 1977) & Lester (N=66)
I. SEEKING RESOLUTION AND EXPRESSING FEELINGS		
II. REDUCING ANXIETY		
III. ESTABLISH AUTONOMY AND MAINTAIN FAMILY TIES		
IV. MAINTAIN FAMILY INTEGRITY	I. MAINTAIN FAMILY INTEGRATION AND STABILITY	
V. MAINTAIN THE PAST AND DEPENDENCE ON RELIGION	II. BELIEVE IN GOD	
VI. ESTABLISH INDEPENDENCE THROUGH SELF DEVELOPMENT	III. ESTABLISH INDEPENDENCE AND SELF SUFFICIENCY	I. ESTABLISH INDEPENDENCE AND SELF SUFFICIENCY
	IV. TRUSTING AND BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS	II. DEVELOP SELF AND INTER- PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS
	V. LIVING UP TO MILITARY'S EXPECTATIONS	III. FITTING INTO THE CORPORATE LIFESTYLE
	VI. KEEPING ACTIVE IN HOBBIES	

FINDINGS

Basic Coping Strategy

Independent of the severity of the stress, and basic to all coping strategies, is the coping pattern of Establishing Independence and Self Sufficiency. All three investigations underscored the importance of wives' ability to develop personal strengths through proclaimed independence, the management of the finances, and through the pursuit of formal education and experiences which would give them additional skills.

Coping With Minimal and Moderate Stress

The development of interpersonal relationships outside of the family system appears as an important coping pattern and contributes to self development and the wives' self esteem. Developing Self and Interpersonal relationships (repeated separations) and Trusting and Building Relationships (routine separations) underscore the importance of supportive relationships between the family and the community in the management of stress.

The community, whether it be military or a non-military complex organization reveals and communicates social expectations and values to families of its employees. The degree to which families are able to accept and internalize these norms, and exhibit behaviors which reflect this acceptance, the better able are they to manage the stresses of that organization, in this case family separations. The coping patterns of Fitting into the Corporate Lifestyle (repeated separations) and Living up to the Military's Expectations reflect the importance of organizational and social norms in the management of stress.

Coping With Moderate and Severe Stress

As we shift our attention to the coping patterns unique to both prolonged and routine (but lengthy) family separation, we can note the increased importance of family integration and family stability. The patterns of Maintaining Family Integration and Stability (routine) and Maintain Family Integrity (prolonged) appear to suggest that the more severe the stress the greater the impact upon family unity and stability. Furthermore, these patterns, suggest that in these extreme situations, families must devote effort and develop strategies to maintain intergration and stability.

Interesting, but not unexpected, formal religion and/or religious beliefs play an important role in the family's ability to manage stress, particularly in the more severe stress situations. Believing in God (routine) and Maintaining the past and Dependence on Religion (prolonged) emerges as being positively related to management of family separation. This would suggest that spiritual support contributes to family unity, self esteem, and also serve as reference points for social norms and expectations which may guide families in stressful situations.

Finally, the three coping patterns which emerge as unique to the management of prolonged separation reveal the hardships of the separation experience, and the increased complexity of the coping strategies employed. Reducing Anxiety as a unique pattern accentuates the emotional demands of this type of separation experience and the deliberate efforts which must be taken to manage the emotional stability of the family unit. Establishing Autonomy and Maintain Family Ties indicate the differentiation in family roles, with wives assuming more permanent status in the breadwinner role, but concentrating at the same time on efforts to maintain family ties, particularly with immediate relatives and inlaws.

The most unique and complex coping pattern is evident in Seeking Resolution and Expressing Feelings. This is the most pervasive cluster with respect to its contribution to the total variance. This pattern is composed of behavior items describing wives' involvement in international, national and regional activities designed to seek a full accounting of their absent husband (dead or alive). Additionally, this pattern includes the development of close relationships with wives in a similar crisis, and as a member of these groups, wives sought to confront and challenge the military system which contributed to this stressful situation. The most striking feature of this coping pattern is the family's active role in an ad hoc collective body capable of confronting one of the sources of stress--the military and its policies. At the same time, families collectively sought social supports (tax breaks, increased income, scholarships for wives and children) on behalf of all families in this situation. Through collective efforts families were able to obtain partial control over the situation and in turn reduce the impact of the stress upon the family unit.

DISCUSSION

One of the unique contributions of Hill's (1958) A, B, C, X formulation which has served as the foundation for family stress theory is the identification of the B Factor or what Hill has come to refer to as the family's crisis-meeting resources. This variable denotes the family's ability to prevent a stressor event of change in the family social system from creating some crisis or disruptiveness in the system (Burr, 1973:202). The initial question raised in this paper is whether coping behaviors may be conceptualized as an unique dimension of this B Factor. Certainly, the present review of coping studies reveal evidence in support of conceptualizing coping behaviors as an integral part of family resources. In turning to Hill and Hansen's (1962) earlier review of the family disaster literature, we can gain greater confidence in this conclusion and a better perspective of the complementary relationship between coping or adaptive behavior and family resources. Hill and Hansen (1962) formulated four propositions depicting this relationship:

- Adaptive behavior is more likely in families that are intact and well integrated than in families that are not;
- Adaptive behavior is more likely in families in which channels of communication are open;
- Adaptive behavior is more likely in families in which authority and status structures are flexible;
- Adaptive behavior is more likely in families that have successfully met past disasters.

In reviewing the findings reported in this paper, three major variables may be extracted as holding some promise of contributing in a unique way to understanding a family's vulnerability to stress, and its ability to recover.

Community Norms

The fit between the family and community (in this case the military and a complex organization) may well be the major determinant of successful adaptation to stress. The family's ability to manage stress may depend on the efficacy of the solutions the culture, community or the organization provides. The ability of families to adapt to life stresses depend in a large part on the adequacy of institutionalized solutions. Hansen and Hill (1964:796) had previously noted the role of the community in the management of stress and concluded:

"Just as the community can create stress on the family it can offer blueprints for behavior under stress...social institutions actually can prepare the family and its members for stress by providing roles and norms for postimpact behavior even before the stress agent hits. The community can prepare the family and the community for stresses by defining roles so that they will better fit emergencies or by developing institutionalized ways of coping with chronic uncertainty."

From this discussion two major propositions may be considered:

- The clarity of Community Norms and Expectations regarding family behavior under stress influences the vulnerability and regenerative power of families.
- The degree to which families accept or reject Community Norms and Expectations influences the preceding proposition, and this is a quadratic relationship in which variation in rejecting Community Norms and Expectations are positively related to family vulnerability and inversely related to regenerative power; and variation in accepting Community Norms and Expectations are inversely related to vulnerability and positively related to family regenerative power.

Interpersonal supports

Family stress theory has played particular attention to wives social participation outside the home. Specific reference has been made to Duvall (1945) and Hill (1949) who recognized the importance of social participation in their studies of family separation. While Interpersonal Relationships and supports may be correlated with wives social behavior, the evidence presented here would suggest that they be treated independently. If the independent variable is defined as the number of interpersonal relationships, the findings seem to justify two propositions.

- The number of interpersonal relationships of wives under stress is related to family vulnerability and this is an inverse relationship.
- The number of interpersonal relationships of wives under stress is related to family regenerative power, and this is a positive relationship.

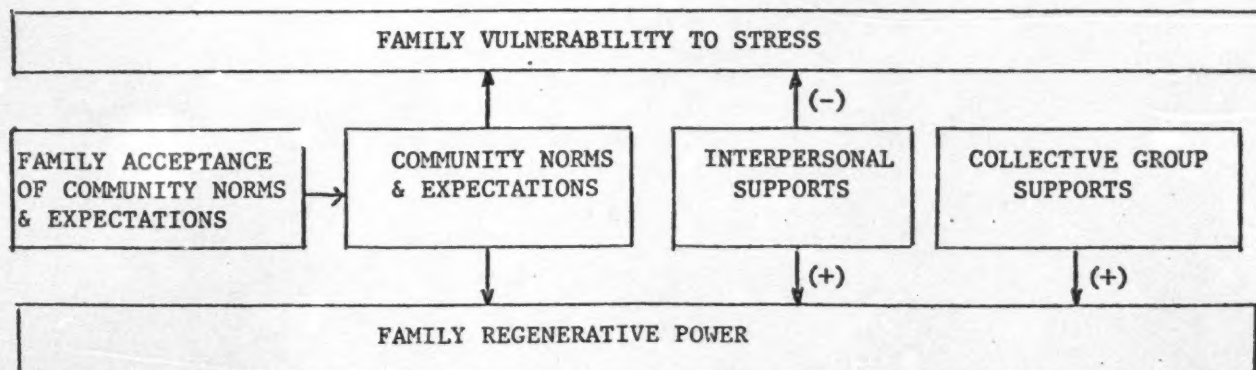
Collective Support

One of the most impressive tests of the limits and potentialities of the family's adaptive capacities occurs in those situations where families live in controlled environments or/and ambiguous situations. As evident in the prolonged separation study, the coping pattern of Seeking Resolution and Expressing Feelings reveals the collective efforts of families to establishing a competing form of social organization to resist the military system and in turn influence policy and decisions which could be seen as threatening to the family unit. In extreme stressful situations such as this, institutionalized solutions to new problems are likely to lag behind. Families are placed in a precarious position of developing new strategies to influence and control the demands to which they are exposed. Increasingly, it is clear that major stresses on the family are not amenable to individual family solutions alone, but depend on highly organized cooperative efforts that transcend those of any individual family no matter how well developed its integration and adaptive resources. The variable discussed appears to be the amount of family involvement in collective support activities which act as a concerted effort on behalf of all families in a specific crisis situation. It seems reasonable to translate this into one proposition.

- The amount of involvement in Collective Support Activities influences the regenerative power of families and this is a positive relationship.

The major propositions developed in this discussion of coping behavior in the management of family stress is presented in Figure 2.

FIGURE 2



SUMMARY

Some of the discrepancy between observations made of families behavior under stress and the family stress literature to date is the tendency to view stress as a short term single stimulus rather than as a complex set of changing conditions that have a history and a future. The family is called upon to respond to stressful conditions through time and must adapt its behavior to the changing character of the stressor. Coping and adaptation itself creates new demands on the family that require additional strategies for managing stress and further adaptation.

The mastery of a stressor event is not a simple repertoire but involves the use of family resources both in terms of intra-family strengths and adaptability as well as active coping strategies directed at the community, the family and, in some cases the stressor event. Through an examination of a select group of studies on family coping behavior evidence has been presented to support the argument that coping behavior is an integral part of family resources. Concomitantly, several propositions are introduced into the existing framework of family stress theory.

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